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ABSTRACT

The results of this research have relevance for sport educators who are integrating sport classes and who are concerned with the interpersonal interactions of boys and girls playing together. The author hypothesized that males and females would prefer to interact in a sport setting with members of their own sex and ability level. The results of an analysis of variance indicated that: (1) males generally preferred to interact with males; (2) females did not generally tend to differentiate on the basis of sex; (3) low ability subjects were equally willing to interact with low or average ability others; and (4) average ability males were equally willing to play with average or above average players while average ability females preferred to interact with similar others. (Author/JD)

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Partner Choice in Cooperative and Competitive Sport Settings

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Partner Choice in Cooperative and Competitive Sport Settings

The recent upsurge in sexually integrated sport settings has generated new questions for sport psychologists interested in social comparison processes. What are the partner preferences of boys and girls in co-educational sport classes? Is sex or ability the more salient variable in predicting choice of a comparison other? Do the rules underlying partner selection differ in cooperative versus competitive sport settings? Interpersonal attraction and social comparison are two areas of research that are important to review for their predictive value in answering these questions.

A review of both the social comparison and interpersonal attraction literature in social psychology indicates that the concept of similarity is a salient variable in predicting attraction and comparison to others. Research has established that similarity on such dimensions of sex (Bjerstedt, 1958; Kohlberg, 1966), ability (Zander & Havelin, 1960; Reagor & Clore, 1970), and personality (Lerner & Becker, 1965; Hodges & Byrne, 1972) affect both the attraction and comparison process. When similarity has not predicted behavior, researchers have attempted to discover the variables affecting comparison to dissimilar others. In a recent review of the social comparison literature (Suls & Miller, 1977) researchers have suggested a variety of factors which influence comparison to both similar and dissimilar others.

The psychological motive to assess accurately ones abilities (Festinger, 1954) is supported by cultural norms in societies where differential distribution of rewards is made on the basis of comparison with others. In addition to a tendency for comparison to similar ability others, there exists a norm for comparison to ones same sex reference group (Zanna, Goethals, & Hill, 1975). Research suggests that ability is often defined in relative terms dependent on ones reference group (Goethals & Darley, 1977) and that ones group can be perceived as having higher or lower ability than other groups (Duquin, 1977). Important questions arise as to how conflict in partner selection is resolved if one must choose between comparing to a similar ability, opposite sex group member and a dissimilar ability, same sex group member.

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While the similarity hypothesis predicts that males and females will choose to intereact with members of their own sex and ability level, the factors which may influence the selection of a partner outside ones sex or ability reference group are quite numerous.

A partial explanation of comparison to a higher ability other comes from Festinger (1954) who posited a unidirectional drive upward to improve abilities. To the extent that an ability can be improved, it can be viewed as an unstable attribute. Although ability is often labeled as a stable attribute in academic settings, in research using motor tasks, subjects have viewed ability as changeable. A subject's belief in the concept of improving ability whether arising from a cultural norm or an achievement oriented society or a genetically determined human drive, offers one explanation of comparison to higher ability others (Wheeler, 1966).

Another factor causing upward comparison and association is the motive to identify with high ability others (Hood, 1973; Latané, 1966; Miller & Suls, 1977). While being a winner is usually the positive result of a specific contest, having high ability is more an assessment of an internal state. Meete and Smith (1977) suggest a distinction between evaluating one's performance (winning or losing) and assessing one's relative ability. They state:

> ...subjects are placed in a dilemma with respect to high-ability, better-performing others: to identify and make their performance look bad but see themselves at a higher ability level, or to contrast and see themselves at a lower ability level but save their performance from looking bad. Subjects should choose the option that makes the net comparison feedback most positive. For example, if seeing oneself at a higher ability level but as having performed badly results in a higher positive net gain than seeing oneself at a lower ability level in order to render one's performance a success, then the subjects will identify with high-ability others rather than see themselves as clearly dissimilar (noncomparable) to them and make performance comparisons irrelevant. (p. 93)

Pressure to see oneself as a winner has been discussed in terms of the motive to validate ones ability, that is, prove to oneself that one is good (Festinger, 1954; Latané, 1966). The pressure to be a winner, especially when outcomes are publicized, can result in the selection of a lower ability comparison other in a competitive or threat situation (Braver, 1971; Hakmiller, 1966; Wilson & Brenner, 1971) as well as the selection of a higher ability other in cooperative situations (Arrowood & Friend, 1969; Gruder, 1971). The decision to compete with a lower ability other and be an easy winner, however, is complicated by the knowledge that high social reinforcement is given for a win against a higher ability other while little if any, social reinforcement is given for a win against a distinctly lower ability other (Willis & Frieze, in press). In sex integrated sport settings, competition or threat as a motive for comparison to dissimilar other may predict that low, as opposed to high, ability subjects would be more likely to choose a partner of the opposite sex. If comparison to a similar other yields an accurate assessment of ones abilities, then the results of such comparison should be expected to have the greatest affective consequences. Thus, if the results of a comparison are expected to be negative, a dissimilar other may be sought out in order to blunt the effect of the negative outcome (Mettee & Riskind, 1974; Mettee & Wilkins, 1972; Morse & Gergen, 1970). Comparison to dissimilar others may, in this sense, be choosing not to seriously compare.

Walster and Walster (1973) state, however, that subjects are more likely to pick dissimilar others when the threat of rejection is lessened. When self esteem is not threatened, as in a cooperative situation, dissimilar others may be selected. As Miller and Suls (1977) state:

> ...motives other than self-evaluation could play an important role in affiliation. Thus, for example, the potential rewardingness of the partner could play a role in the individuals' eventual choice. With this in mind, the nature of the affiliative situation can be seen as a significant factor in partner choices, since potential partners could have different degrees of rewardingness in different

> situations. Cooperative versus competitive tasks would seem a likely example of situations in which the rewardingness of a potential partner might vary. (p. 104-105)

To the extent that a situation is not competitive, or a person chooses not to define the situation as competitive (Martens, 1975), other motives such as structuring a positive social interaction, are more likely to have an effect upon the selection process and may result in the selection of a partner outside ones reference group. Cooperative sport situations may thus be more likely to elicit cross-sex partner preference than competitive sport settings.

The purpose of this study was to test the similarity hypothesis as applied to partner selection in a cooperative and competitive sport setting. The study used similarity on sex and ability as factors believed to influence partner choice in a racquetball game. The author predicted that in competitive and cooperative sport settings same sex partners would be preferred to opposite sex partners and same ability partners would be preferred to higher or lower ability partners.

Method

Subjects. Subjects were 242 eleventh and twelveth grade high school students from a predominantly white, middle class, suburban community. A 20 second racquetball wall volley test was administered to all students. Subjects stood in a 10' by 20' area facing one wall. On the command "Go" subjects served and volleyed the racquetball against the wall until the command "Stop" was given. Subjects were told volleys must be made from behind the tape line located 10' from the wall and that only the total number of consecutive volleys (with or without a bounce) made within 20 seconds would be counted. Based upon the total group results on the wall volley test below average, average and above average norms were established. The norms established were 6, 11 and 15 consecutive volleys, respectively, within the 20 second time limit..

Procedure. Two methods were devised for measuring the dependent variables. In method one, 133 subjects rated their own racquetball ability as below average, average or above average. Subjects then saw a video tape of three males and three females one each of high, average and low ability, taking the wall volley test. Before each stimulus person was seen on the tape the experimenter told the subjects how that person scored on the test (i.e., "This person scored below average on the wall volley test.") On a six point scale going from a low of strongly unfavorable to a high or strongly favorable, subjects were first asked to rate how favorably they would feel about competing against this person in a racquetball game (competitive condition) and then to rate how favorably they would feel about having this person as a partner in a racquetball game (cooperative condition). Physical attractiveness of the taped stimulus persons was not considered to be a factor because all taped subjects were of average build and filming was done from the side and far enough away so that faces could not be perceived clearly.

In method two, a separate group of 109 subjects completed a questionnaire which described the six stimulus persons (e.g., Female average ability). As in method one, subjects rated their own ability then rated on the six point scale how favorably they felt about competing against and then cooperating with each of the six stimulus persons.

Results

The experimental design consisted of a three between three within analysis of variance. The between variables included sex of subject, ability of subject and method. The within variables were sex of partner, ability of partner and cooperative/competitive condition. The data analysis indicated no main effects, but significant interactions were found and as shown in Table 1, subsequent Scheffé tests indicated the location of these differences.

Insert Table 1 about here

Sex and Ability. High ability subjects preferred to compete with partners of equal ability, while low ability subjects were found to regard both low and average ability partners as equally desirable opponents F (4, 460) = 2.64, p <.05. Average ability females differed from average ability males in showing a strong preference to interact with average ability partners, F (4, 460) = 3.80, p <.01. Average ability males showed an equal interest in competing and cooperating with an average or high ability partner. The average ability female group was also the only group which showed a preference for a female partner, F (2, 230) = 5.75, p <.01. Analysis revealed that while males preferred to interact with males, $\bar{X}$ = 4.12, as opposed to females, $\bar{X}$ = 3.78, females generally showed equal interest in male, $\bar{X}$ = 3.96, and female, $\bar{X}$ = 3.90 partners. Significant differences were found in the ratings of same ability male and female partners. Subjects rated low and average ability females less favorable than low or average ability males, but high ability females were rated the same as high ability males F (2, 460) = 5.63, p <.01.

Cooperative/Competitive Condition and Method. The video method, being a closer approximation to a real partner selection process may have had the effect of making sex of partner a more salient variable in partner selection. A simple intereaction between sex of partner and method revealed that the video group showed a significantly greater preference for interacting with male partners F (1, 230) = 9.96, p <.01. Analysis on situation revealed two significant interactions with ability. High ability subjects showed a higher preference for competition, $\bar{X}$ = 4.12, than cooperation, $\bar{X}$ = 3.79, while low ability subjects preferred the cooperative condition, $\bar{X}$ = 3.89, to the competitive one, $\bar{X}$ = 3.53, F (2, 230) = 5.78, p <.01. Finally, as indicated in Table 1, subjects showed a preference to compete with rather than cooperate with low ability partners, and a preference for cooperating as opposed to competing with, a high ability partner, F (2, 460) = 19.13, p <.01.

Discussion

The results of this research have relevance for those sport educators who are attempting to integrate sport classes and who are concerned with the interpersonal interactions of boys and girls playing together. The results of this study suggest the existance of various motives which operate to influence partner selection in cooperative and competitive sport conditions. In fitting these results to the list of factors, previously established by research, which are believed to affect the social comparison process, certain interesting comparisons emerge. Contrary to research suggesting the motive to validate ability these results suggest that subjects were generally motivated to improve their abilities. Subjects appeared relatively unconcerned with validating their ability because downward comparisons were never preferred to equal or upward comparisons. In a replication of the results of Miller and Suls (1977), low ability subjects were equally willing to compete with low and average ability others but not with high ability others. One-step upward comparison choice in competition might also be a reflection of the belief that greater reinforcement results after defeating a higher ability other than a similar ability other. Upward comparison appears more likely to occur with males as evidenced by the fact that males but not females of average ability were willing to interact with high ability partners. The fact that there exists more pressure on males to be proficient in sports may partially explain this willingness for upward comparative interaction.

Subjects also evidenced an interest in winning by preferring competition to cooperation with a low ability partner and preferring cooperation to competition with a high ability other. The interest in winning, however, did not override the self-esteem concerns of average ability females who were more willing to cooperate with average ability subjects than high ability subjects. For these females the fear of possibly being the cause for a loss in a cooperative game with a high ability partner may have overrode the increased chances of winning with that partner.

The pressure to compare with ones sex reference group seemed to be more salient for males than for females. Only the average ability female group showed a strong preference to compete exclusively with other females. Other female groups generally indicated a willingness to interact with both sexes. Average ability males showed a strong preference for competing with males but did not indicate this preference in the cooperative situation. High ability males preferred to cooperate with other high ability males but were equally willing to compete with high ability females and males. Low ability subjects appeared to be the most willing to participate with both sexes and more than one ability group. It may be that this group is the most flexible because they are less affected by any one motivating factor influencing the comparison process. To this group the motives for improving ability, winning, positive social interaction, identification, and accurate assessment of ability may all be weighted more evenly than with the average or high ability groups.

For sport psychologists interested in social comparison processes in sex integrated sport settings the results of this study suggest that although ability of partner may be a more salient variable than sex in influencing partner selection the results also indicate that females of equal ability are often perceived as less capable than their male peers. Determining these social perceptions and discovering the motives influencing the comparison process increases our understanding of comparison choices and will hopefully aid teachers in structuring coeducational sport settings which will facilitate both the skill and the social development of students.

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Table 1

Mean Preference Scores for Partners of Different Ability Levels, Same Sex, and Opposite Sex as a Function of Subject Sex and Ability

Subject Ability	n	Δs	Δa	Partner Ability: Above Average Male	Above Average Female	Average Male	Average Female	Below Average Male	Below Average Female
Competitive Condition									
Above Average									
Male	34	.38	.58	5.26	4.99	4.65	4.03	3.26	2.82
Female	8	.91	1.39	5.12	4.88	4.62	4.00	3.00	1.87
Average									
Male	48	.32	.48	4.93	4.50	4.72	4.06	3.41	2.76
Female	101	.21	.33	3.44	3.58	4.15	4.58	4.01	3.70
Below Average									
Male	10	.78	1.19	2.70	3.30	4.30	4.00	4.30	3.60
Female	41	.34	.52	2.80	2.63	3.85	3.92	4.19	3.56
Cooperative Condition									
Above Average									
Male	34	.38	.58	5.26	4.67	4.38	3.97	2.05	2.35
Female	8	.91	1.39	5.25	5.00	4.87	3.88	2.38	1.87
Average									
Male	48	.32	.48	4.39	4.62	4.41	4.02	2.95	2.60
Female	101	.21	.33	4.40	4.56	5.01	4.97	3.03	2.91
Below Average									
Male	10	.78	1.19	3.90	4.30	4.40	4.30	4.50	3.70
Female	41	.34	.52	4.39	4.53	4.63	4.41	2.94	2.63

Note. Δs is the interval estimate for the mean used for determining differences on sex at $p < .05$. Δa is the interval estimate for the mean used for determining differences on ability levels at $p < .05$.